

# The Stained Glass Ceiling: Social Contact and Mitt Romney's "Religion Problem"

David E. Campbell · John C. Green · J. Quin Monson

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**Abstract** Why did Mitt Romney face antagonism toward his Mormon religion in the 2008 election? Using experiments conducted in the real time of the campaign, we test voters' reactions to information about Romney's religious background. We find that voters were concerned specifically with Romney's religious affiliation, not simply with the fact that he is religious. Furthermore, concern over Romney's Mormonism dwarfed concerns about the religious backgrounds of Hillary Clinton and Mike Huckabee. We find evidence for a curvilinear hypothesis linking social contact with Mormons and reaction to information about Romney's Mormonism. Voters who have no personal exposure to Mormons are most likely to be persuaded by both negative and positive information about the Mormon faith, while voters who have sustained personal contact with Mormons are the least likely to be persuaded either way. Voters with moderate contact, however, react strongly to negative information about the religion but are not persuaded by countervailing positive information.

**Keywords** Religion and politics · Voter behavior · Presidential elections · Tolerance · Social contact

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D. E. Campbell (✉)  
Department of Political Science, University of Notre Dame, 217 O'Shaughnessy Hall,  
Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA  
e-mail: Dave\_campbell@nd.edu

J. C. Green  
University of Akron, 382 Carroll Street, Akron, OH 44325, USA  
e-mail: green@uakron.edu

J. Q. Monson  
Brigham Young University, 745 Spencer W. Kimball Tower, Provo, UT 84602, USA  
e-mail: Quin.monson@byu.edu

The 2008 presidential campaign saw the end of one social barrier to the presidency, race, and a strong challenge to another, gender.<sup>1</sup> But the campaign also revealed the persistence of still another: religious affiliation. Although many observers believed such religious bias largely ended with John F. Kennedy's election in 1960, Mitt Romney faced criticism of his faith while running for the 2008 Republican nomination (Weisberg 2006; Linker 2006; Feldman 2008). In Kennedy's case, the concern was his Catholicism; for Romney it was his Mormonism.<sup>2</sup> Both Kennedy and Romney faced a "stained glass ceiling," a potential limitation on their candidacies based on religious affiliation.

Romney's "religion problem" presents a puzzle. Since 1960, the impact of religion on the vote has changed, with religious affiliation becoming less important and strength of religious commitment becoming more so; stronger commitment has become associated with Republican voters and weaker commitment with Democratic voters (Campbell 2007; Green 2007). Thus one might have assumed that a high level of religious commitment would be an asset for a candidate in Republican presidential primaries—particularly if the candidate was committed to a religious community, like the Latter-day Saints, that is highly conservative and strongly Republican (Campbell and Monson 2007). And yet religious affiliation appeared to be a liability for Romney (Green and Silk 2009). This paper asks why Romney was unable to break the stained glass ceiling in 2008. While our analysis centers on reactions to one candidate in one election, it can nonetheless inform our general understanding of the information flow within a campaign, and how members of out-groups are perceived by voters—whether those out-groups are religions other than Mormonism or defined in terms other than religion.

One piece of the puzzle of Romney's religion problem is suggested by Putnam and Campbell (2010) in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. The great religious diversity of the United States creates the possibility of faith-based conflict, dividing the electorate into accepted "in-groups" and rejected "out-groups." However, Americans are generally accepting of a wide variety of religious groups other than their own. In particular, Jews and Catholics are viewed more positively by members of other faiths than any other religious groups—remarkable, given the history of anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism in the United States. According to Putnam and Campbell, Americans' high regard for most other religions is due to the degree of inter-religious "bridging," or social connections across religious lines. By the same logic, exceptions to the general pattern of inter-religious tolerance—that is, religious out-groups—are largely owing to the lack of social connections between adherents of these "unpopular" religions and other

<sup>1</sup> Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the 2009 annual meetings of the Midwest Political Science Association and the American Political Science Association, as well as the 2009 conference, "The Change Election?," held at the University of Notre Dame. We are grateful for the helpful comments of Jamie Druckman, Geoff Layman, Chris Karpowitz, and three anonymous reviewers. Our participation in the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) was supported by the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy at the University of Notre Dame, the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron, and by the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy at Brigham Young University.

<sup>2</sup> More technically, membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Here we use "Latter-day Saints," "LDS," and "Mormon" interchangeably.

Americans. The lack of social contact means that most people have little personal knowledge of the perceived out-group, and are thus susceptible to persuasion by negative information about the group in question.

This analysis extends the theoretical understanding of inter-religious bridging by focusing on its political implications. Specifically, we examine how voters respond to different frames for the out-group membership of a candidate and how those responses are mediated by social contact with members of that out-group. In other words, we contribute to the literature on both social contact and framing by seeking to understand the interaction between the two. Campaign information does not circulate in a vacuum, but instead interacts with the personal experiences of voters.

Mormons are an important—but not the only—example of a religious out-group. For starters, they are unpopular for religious reasons, as both their theology and active proselytization engender resistance from members of other religions, as well as people who are not particularly religious (Givens 1997). In addition, they are relatively small, geographically concentrated, and are the most socially insular of America's major religious traditions—that is, they are most likely to marry within their religion and have the fewest friends and family members outside of the faith (Putnam and Campbell 2010, Chapter 15). Thus, we suggest that Romney failed to break the stained glass ceiling in part because of the unpopularity of Mormons—driven largely by a lack of social contact between Mormons and other Americans—and in part because that low level of social contact of Mormons allowed negative information about Romney's religion to dissuade voters from supporting him, even in the face of countervailing positive information.

We investigate the impact of social contact on support for Mitt Romney 2008, using survey experiments conducted with real voters (a representative sample of the electorate), in real time (in January and February of 2008), and precisely when Romney's Mormonism was a real concern (the winnowing phase of nomination process). We find that information about the LDS religion had a varying impact on support for Romney according to voters' social contact with Mormons. However, this effect was curvilinear: voters who report a moderate level of contact pull sharply away from Romney upon hearing negative information about Mormonism (like voters with no personal exposure to Mormons) but are not reassured by positive information about the Mormon religion (just as voters with sustained contact are not affected by information about Mormonism).

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, we describe attitudes of Americans towards Mormons, with a special emphasis on negative charges and positive counter-arguments—that is, different frames—about Romney's religion in the 2008 campaign. Second, we draw on the literature to develop two competing hypotheses on how social contact mitigates the negative perception of Mormons as an out-group, and how voters respond to different ways of framing Romney's Mormonism. Third, we describe our survey experiments, present our analysis of the results, and adjudicate between the hypotheses. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for understanding the role of Romney's religion in the 2012 presidential election and, more generally, social contact as a mediator for information that circulates during electoral campaigns. We conclude with some thoughts regarding the future of religious tolerance in the United States.

## Mormons as a Religious Out-Group

Past research has found that voters react to candidates' group memberships, including their race (Citrin et al. 1990), gender (Streb et al. 2008) and religion (Berinsky and Mendelberg 2005; Braman and Sinno 2009; Kalkan et al. 2009; Layman et al. n.d.). Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Hogg and Abrams 1988) is useful in explaining why some group associations are positive and others negative. From this perspective, individual identity is a self-concept derived from perceived membership in particular social groups. Having an identity defines who one is, and thus one's in-group. But it also defines who one is not, creating out-groups (Tajfel 1982). Brewer et al. (1998) describe a process of "out-group differentiation," or drawing distinctions between in-group and out-group members, that leads to distrust and even open hostility toward the out-group. Voters are wary of politicians from out-groups, whether because of pre-existing assumptions regarding that group, the information that circulates in a campaign about the group, or a combination of both.

There is ample evidence that Mormons were regarded as an out-group by a large minority of voters in the 2008 election cycle. For example, Mormons had low favorability ratings (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007a) and low scores on feeling thermometers (Putnam and Campbell 2010) compared to many other religious groups.<sup>3</sup> The principal reason for the out-group status of Mormons is religious disagreements with other Americans, and while such disagreements have multiple potential sources (Penning 2009; McDermott, n.d.; Benson et al. 2011), a key feature is the belief that Mormons are not Christians (Givens 1997). A large majority of Americans who claim a religious affiliation perceive that Mormons are "very different" from their own religion (62 %) and a large minority believe that Mormons are not part of the broader Christian tradition (31 %) (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007a).

This perception that Mormons are not Christians has potential political implications in part because of Americans' *civil religion*, the religious—if non-sectarian—trappings that surround many public ceremonies and patriotic rituals (Bellah 1967; Green 2010). American civil religion implies that the nation's political leaders, and particularly the president, are expected to play a quasi-religious role in public life. As the head of state, many voters expect the President to represent them symbolically, being "like them" in religious terms (Green 2010). Furthermore, a large majority of Americans believe that the U.S. was founded as a "Christian nation" (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2006). Given these beliefs, one can see why many Americans might be wary of a candidate perceived to be a member of a "suspicious" religion—whether that candidate is a Mormon, a Muslim, or has no religion at all.

Polling consistently showed that between one-quarter to one-third of the American population would not vote for a Mormon presidential candidate on the

<sup>3</sup> Putnam and Campbell (2010), report that the mean feeling thermometer for Mormons within the American population is 48 degrees, lower than the ratings for Jews (59) and Catholics (58) but higher than the feeling thermometer score given to Muslims (44).

basis of religious affiliation. Typical is a 2007 Gallup Poll, which found that 25 % of Americans said they would not vote for a qualified candidate of their party who is a Mormon (Jones and Jeffrey 2007). That number was virtually unchanged in 2011, at 22 % (Gallup 2011). Similarly, a 2011 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 25 % of Americans said they would be less willing to support a presidential candidate who is Mormon (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2011a, 2011b). Using a list experiment, Monson and Riding (2009) likewise find that 27 % of Americans would oppose the election of a Mormon candidate.<sup>4</sup> And the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that Republican voters who were less likely to vote for a Mormon were markedly less favorable to Romney than other Republicans (54 vs. 82 %) in 2007 (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007b).

The mere existence of a candidate with out-group status, however, is not necessarily enough to make it a factor in a campaign. Rather, the political significance of a candidate's out-group is a function of how that information is framed by the candidate, his or her opponents, and the media. The voluminous framing literature helps delineate possible information effects in a campaign. Druckman (2001) distinguishes between "frames in thought," or how an individual understands given circumstances cognitively, and "frames in communication," or the way information is conveyed from one to another. At the individual cognitive level, frames can interact with existing information and competence (Nelson et al. 1997). Perceptions of out-groups are one example. As a communication tool, a frame can be understood as an "opinion recipe" for how information should be understood by voters and such frames can be used as "rhetorical weapons created and sharpened by political elites to advance their interests and ideas" (Kinder 1998, p. 822). The application of out-group status to a particular candidate is one example of a frame employed—often to considerable effect—in political campaigns.

From this perspective, campaigns are in part a clash over competing frames and counter-frames. As Druckman (2001) explains, the information in the environment that shapes an individual's thought process produces the "framing effect." Framing theory thus informs our understanding of information effects, both about out-groups and about candidates. Such value-laden framing can have important effects in presidential campaigns (Barker 2005). One of the contributions of this paper is thus to add a social dimension to framing effects, in order to better understand reactions to Romney's Mormonism.

Romney's Mormonism was a frequent topic of discussion during the 2008 presidential campaign, often framed in negative terms. One much publicized example was by a rival candidate, Mike Huckabee, who mused to the *New York Times*, "don't Mormons believe that Jesus and the devil are brothers?"—a common charge leveled against Mormons by their theological critics (Chafets 2007). Such a comment implied that Mormons are outside the mainstream of a "Christian nation." Negative information spread via e-mail, blog posts, direct mail flyers, talk radio, and over-the-backyard fence conversation were likely to have been phrased in far more

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, these figures are comparable to the percentage who said they would not vote for a Catholic in 1960 (29 %) and to the percentage who said they would not vote for a Mormon in 1968 (also 25 %) (Jones and Jeffrey 2007).

incendiary language. For example, in the week prior to a 2007 debate in South Carolina among Republican presidential hopefuls, the *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* reported that a “wave of anti-Mormon literature had poured into South Carolina mailboxes,” including an anonymous “8-page diatribe” about the LDS religion (Spencer 2007).

There were also attempts to rebut such negative charges by casting Mormonism in a positive light. Most notably, Romney spoke about his religious beliefs in a high-profile, nationally televised speech in December 2007, just prior to the beginning of the nomination contests. In that speech, he invoked John F. Kennedy with the statement “A person should not be elected because of his faith nor should he be rejected because of his faith.” But then he went on to say:

There is one fundamental question about which I often am asked. What do I believe about Jesus Christ? I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind. My church’s beliefs about Christ may not all be the same as those of other faiths... It is important to recognize that while differences in theology exist between the churches in America, we share a common creed of moral convictions. And where the affairs of our nation are concerned, it’s usually a sound rule to focus on the latter—on the great moral principles that urge us all on a common course. (Romney 2007)

In his speech, Romney acknowledges the out-group status of the LDS (“My church’s beliefs... may not all be the same as those of other faiths”), while also trying to minimize that distinctiveness by testifying that he is truly a Christian (“I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God and the Savior of mankind”). He also advances two positive counter-frames, a *Separationist* argument (candidates should not be elected or rejected because of their faith) and a *Common Values* argument (different religions share the same values).

In the analysis that follows we will consider the impact of three kinds of information about Mormons on support for Romney: (a) the factual statement that Romney is an active member and a former lay leader of the Mormon Church; (b) the claim, negative to most Americans, that Mormons are not Christians; and (c) the positive counter-claims proffered to assuage concerns that Mormons are not Christians, the *Separationist* and *Common Values* arguments. Furthermore, we will examine how social contact with Mormons interacts with these frames to produce different reactions from voters.

## Social Contact and the Impact of Campaign Information

The social contact literature suggests that personal interaction with members of a perceived out-group may generate acceptance of the group if specific conditions are met. Three of those conditions are that the parties involved in the contact have equal status, share common goals, and their interaction has the normative support of law or custom (Allport and Gordon 1979; Pettigrew 1998). Family members and close friends almost always meet these conditions. Indeed, in a meta-analysis of social contact studies, Pettigrew and Tropp (2000) “assumed that friendship requires the

operation of conditions that approach Allport's specifications for optimal contact" (p. 108). Similarly, close friendships across religious lines have been shown by Putnam and Campbell (2010) to foster inter-religious tolerance. Their conclusion is based on a panel survey that rules out the possibility that it is tolerance that leads to inter-religious friendships; the causal direction goes the other way. In the context of a presidential election, Benson et al. (2011) find that greater social contact with members of a religious minority lessens bias against a candidate of that minority, except in a condition of perceived political competition with that minority.

The central idea behind contact theory is that the acceptance of a group arises from extensive personal experiences with, and actionable knowledge of, the group's members. In effect, such individuals are likely to have made up their minds about the group.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, individuals who have less contact with the group—especially those with no contact at all—are less likely to accept the group because they have little to no personal experience with members of the group. As a consequence, these people are less likely to have made up their minds about the group. In a political context, such attitudes about a group can condition voters' responses to negative charges and positive counter-claims offered about a candidate's social background. Voters whose minds are made up are less likely to react to any campaign information—negative or positive—when deciding whether to support the candidate, while voters with less firm opinions are more open to persuasion.

One reading of this logic of social contact is an implied *linear* relationship between the quantity of social contact and the impact of campaign messages about the candidate that reference the group. This linear hypothesis predicts that people who have the least (that is, no) personal contact with Mormons are most hostile toward a Mormon presidential candidate, people with moderate contact have moderate hostility, and those with the most contact have the least, perhaps even no, hostility. Likewise, the linear hypothesis leads to the prediction that voters who have less contact with Mormons will have a stronger negative reaction to a negative frame, but will also be more likely to be persuaded by a positive frame. In short: less contact, more persuasion in either direction.

However, there is a competing hypothesis. Another reading of the logic of social contact suggests a *curvilinear* relationship between contact and acceptance of the group, although we are unaware that this has ever been empirically confirmed. This pattern could occur because the conditions for "optimal contact" are *not* fulfilled by a passing acquaintance with a member of the group. In fact, knowing a member of an out-group in passing may only exacerbate a sense of distance from the group rather than inspire acceptance.

The curvilinear hypothesis holds that the nature of the social contact matters to the acceptance of the group. Individuals with an acquaintance from the group become aware that the group is indeed distinctive, but do not have the sustained personal relationship that leads to acceptance of that distinctiveness. In essence,

<sup>5</sup> The resulting opinion of the group is likely to be positive simply because of the positive nature of family and friendship ties. However, the same logic would apply for individuals who had negative relationships with family and friends because such individuals are still likely to have made up their minds about the group.

such individuals may have a firmer basis for rejecting the group members than voters who have no contact with the group at all. Thus, in a political context, voters with a moderate level of contact with a group may be the *most* receptive to negative charges about a candidate's social background and *least* open to positive counter-claims.

The curvilinear hypothesis makes the same predictions as the linear hypothesis for voters with either no contact or extensive contact with Mormons—those with no contact are open to persuasion in either direction, while those with extensive contact are largely impervious to either negative or positive framing of Romney's Mormonism. The difference lies with voters who have a moderate degree of contact. For these voters, the curvilinear hypothesis predicts that they will react strongly to negative claims about Mormonism, thus decreasing their support for Romney (that is, they will react just as strongly as voters with no contact with Mormons). And rather than be persuaded, moderately or otherwise, by positive counterclaims, the hypothesis predicts that such information will have little to no effect on their perceptions of Mormonism, and thus on their likelihood of voting for Romney. In other words, these voters react to negative information like voters who have no contact with Mormons but their response to positive information is like that of voters who have sustained contact.

Our analysis will pit the linear and curvilinear contact hypotheses against each other by differentiating among voters according to their level of social contact with Latter-day Saints as we examine their reactions to the claims and counter-claims about Romney's Mormonism in 2008.

## Survey Experiments and Findings

Our analysis employs data collected in the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP), a multi-investigator panel study conducted over the course of the 2008 presidential campaign season. Twenty-seven research teams collaborated on the study, which was led by Lynn Vavreck (UCLA) and Simon Jackman (Stanford). The CCAP draws on a sample of respondents drawn from the YouGov/Polimetrix Polling-Point panel, matched to a sampling frame of the American Community Survey.<sup>6</sup> There were six waves of the CCAP conducted between December 2007 and November 2008. The surveys containing our experimental manipulations were administered on-line during the January 2008 wave to respondents from the

<sup>6</sup> For the technical details of the matching procedure employed by YouGov/Polimetrix, see Jackman and Vavreck (2010). For evidence regarding the representativeness of samples drawn using this method, see Vavreck and Rivers (2008). Note that the survey oversampled battleground states, such that voters in non-battleground and battleground states are represented in equal proportions. Sherkat (2007) presents evidence that fundamentalist Christians are under-represented in the General Social Survey which, if also true for the CCAP, could potentially present a problem for population estimates using these data. However, since one factor for fundamentalists' non-response to the GSS is the perceived social distance between fundamentalists and the highly educated, female interviewers who conduct the study's face-to-face interviews, it is not clear that the same would apply to a truly anonymous internet survey. Even more importantly, however, even if the CCAP does under-represent fundamentalist Christians, or any other group in the population, it does not affect the internal validity of our experiment.



modules of the University of Akron, Brigham Young University, and the University of Notre Dame. The field dates were January 24th to February 4th, although over 90 % of the surveys were completed by January 28th. Since Romney dropped out of the primaries on February 7, 2008, at the time we conducted our experiment he was a viable candidate for the Republican nomination.<sup>7</sup>

There are both advantages and disadvantages to conducting an experiment about a real candidate in the heat of an actual campaign. On the one hand, our experiment arguably reflects voters' concrete attitudes in "real time," rather than views on abstractions divorced from the campaign. On the other hand, our experiment inevitably focuses on a single candidate in a particular context. Accordingly, we must be cautious in generalizing our results to other candidates, even other Mormon candidates. Nonetheless, we note that the effects we find in an experiment that specifically mentions Mitt Romney are comparable to non-experimental results about a generic Mormon candidate—for example, a Gallup Poll (Jones and Jeffrey 2007) conducted almost a decade prior to Romney's first run for the presidency—and a list experiment that includes an unnamed Mormon candidate (Monson and Riding 2009). (Although, given that this list experiment was done in early 2008, many subjects were undoubtedly thinking of Romney as they responded.)

Respondents were provided with a brief description of Romney, and then asked whether the information makes them more or less likely to vote for that candidate. For example, here is the baseline description, which includes no information about his religion but instead only a positive, boilerplate synopsis of his biography:

*As you know, Mitt Romney is running for president. He is a successful businessman, a former governor of Massachusetts, and the head of the 2002 Winter Olympics. He has been married for thirty-nine years and raised five sons.*

*All else being equal, does the above information make you more or less likely to vote for Mitt Romney?*

*Much more likely*

*Somewhat more likely*

*Somewhat less likely*

*Much less likely*<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Because of the concern that the timing of the experiment might affect how respondents reacted to information about Romney's religion, we have also interacted the treatment variables with a variable measuring the date of interview. Results are unchanged (details available upon request).

<sup>8</sup> Note that there is no middle category among the response options. Respondents had to indicate that they were more or less likely to vote for the candidate; they could not say that the information had no effect on their vote choice. This was done to ensure that respondents did not reflexively select "no effect" out of a desire to take the path of least resistance. We account for the absence of a middle category by only reporting comparisons between treatment conditions. If the absence of a middle category artificially pushes respondents in one direction or another, we would expect that bias to be the same regardless of the treatment, since the response options always remain the same. Accordingly, we can make comparisons across treatment conditions—the absence of a middle option does not compromise the internal validity of the experiment.

To simplify the presentation of our results, these four categories were collapsed into a binary variable: 0 = somewhat or much less likely, 1 = somewhat or much more likely.<sup>9</sup> Thus, a negative coefficient means that variable predicts lower support for Romney.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of multiple descriptions of the candidate. These additional treatments include information pertaining to Romney's religion (described below). We note that each candidate description met the criterion of only containing factual information, which undoubtedly weakens the effect of the treatments relative to what voters actually hear during the course of a campaign. Much of the information that circulates in a campaign is false and thus potentially more inflammatory.

The cell size for each treatment averages roughly 200 cases, a relatively large number that ensures a high degree of statistical power and the ability to look at subgroups of respondents.<sup>10</sup> The randomization across treatments was successful, as there are no statistically significant differences for gender, education, partisanship, age, evangelical affiliation, or Catholic affiliation.<sup>11</sup> Even though we have no demographic imbalances across treatments, we have nonetheless opted to include control variables in our models. They obviously have no substantive effect on our results, but they modestly reduce unexplained variance (with a correspondingly modest increase in statistical power) and, perhaps more importantly, they provide benchmarks for comparing the impact of our treatments. Similarly, this method of presentation enables the side-by-side comparison of the coefficients for our different treatments.

Finally, social contact with Mormons is measured with a question that asks respondents if they know a Mormon and, if yes, how they are acquainted with the Mormon they know best. Do they have a Mormon as either a close friend or family member, or as a neighbor, co-worker, or acquaintance? From these responses we created three categories: people who do not know a Mormon at all, those who know a Mormon in passing (neighbor or co-worker), and those who know a Mormon well (close friend or family member). Roughly 46 % of the American population did not know a Mormon at all, 40 % knew one in passing, and 14 % were well acquainted with a Mormon.

## The Impact of the Out-Group Status of Mormons

A first step in our analysis is to assess the impact of the out-group status of Mormons on support for Romney. Here we compare responses to the baseline

<sup>9</sup> However, we have also run all of our models using a four-category dependent variable, with ordered logit as the estimator. The substantive results are unchanged (and available upon request).

<sup>10</sup> With a cell size of 200 and the observed standard deviation of the dependent variable (roughly .5), a power test reveals that we can detect a difference of 0.15 85 % of the time, with an alpha level of .05 and assuming a two-tailed test. Note, however, that the questions about social contact were only asked of 2/3 of the respondents, thus reducing the cell sizes for those analyses. For those analyses, we can detect a difference of 0.19 85 % of the time. Smaller subsets mean still less power, although the size of the negative reaction to Romney's Mormonism is large enough that we nonetheless find statistically significant effects.

<sup>11</sup> The randomization check was performed by conducting a Chi-square test on the distribution of each demographic trait across the treatment conditions.

description of Romney (with no mention of religion) to an identical description that adds, “Mitt Romney has also been a local leader in his church” (*Church* frame), and a second treatment that substitutes, “Mitt Romney has also been a local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church” (*Mormon* frame). These frames resemble Druckman’s (2001) “frames of thought” and provide evidence of voters existing perceptions of Mormons as a group.

Because we have a binary dependent variable, we employ logistic regression as our estimator. We evaluate the effect of these two frames by simply including each treatment as a dichotomous variable, with the baseline description of Romney as the omitted category. Thus, each coefficient indicates the difference in Romney’s support between respondents who received that treatment versus the baseline. We also control for age (Romney did better among older voters), region (Romney found less support among Southerners), and gender (Romney did modestly worse among women). Mormon respondents are dropped from the analysis (roughly 1 % of cases).

We first display results from a model with all respondents, and then for different subsets of voters, since we have theoretically grounded reasons to think that reactions to Romney’s religion would vary across subgroups in the population. These include evangelical Protestants, who have an historical antagonism toward Mormons (Benson et al. 2011) and are a critical bloc of Republican primary voters.<sup>12</sup> Because one might think that religious affiliation matters most to voters who themselves have a strong degree of religious commitment or, alternatively, to those who are the most secular, we also divided respondents into three levels of religious commitment, measured with an index of religious attendance and personal importance of religion.<sup>13</sup> In addition, we tested to see if Romney’s religion matters more, or less, to likely Republican primary voters, and to those with greater political interest. Finally, we also tested whether voters responded differently if they were already aware of Romney’s religion.<sup>14</sup> By subdividing the data in this way, we can easily compare effects across models. The alternative of interacting each variable with the treatment variables is far more cumbersome and difficult to interpret, but produces the same substantive results.

Results from the models are displayed in Table 1, while Figs. 1 and 2 provide a more intuitive display of the predicted values calculated from the logit coefficients. Specifically, we display the likelihood of voting for Romney, having set the control variables so that South is 0, male is 1, and age is at its mean value. The figures

<sup>12</sup> We coded evangelical Protestants using the respondent’s specific religious denomination consistent with Layman and Green (2005), Green (2007), and Steensland et al. (2000).

<sup>13</sup> The eigenvalue for the factor score of frequency of religious attendance and the guidance provided by religion is 1.17.

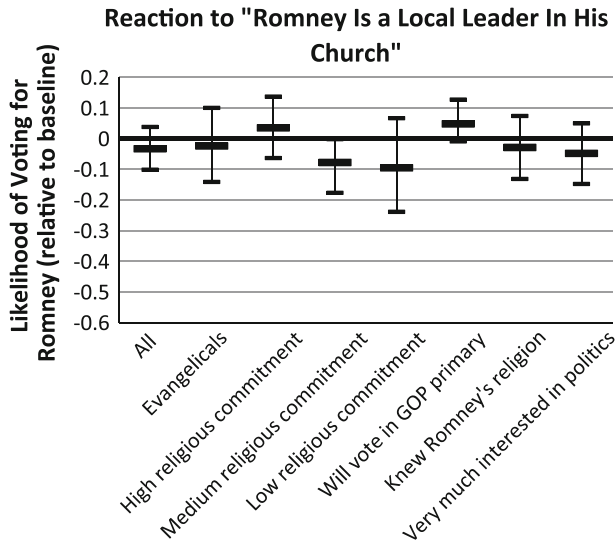
<sup>14</sup> Republican primary voters were identified with a question on the common content baseline survey (variable BCAP4) that asked registered voters to identify whether they would vote in their state’s Democratic or Republican primary/caucus. Political interest was also gauged using the baseline survey (variable BCAP813)—those who indicated that they are “very much interested” in politics. Knowledge of Romney’s religion was measured with an open-ended item specific to our study. We coded the open-ended responses liberally, counting the many variations of “Mormon,” “Morman” [sic], “LDS,” “Latter-day Saint,” “Church of LDS” and so on as correct. Details for our coding are available upon request. By this measure, roughly half of respondents were aware of Romney’s religion.

**Table 1** Impact of religious cues on likelihood of voting for Romney: Results from logistic regression (0 = less likely, 1 = more likely)

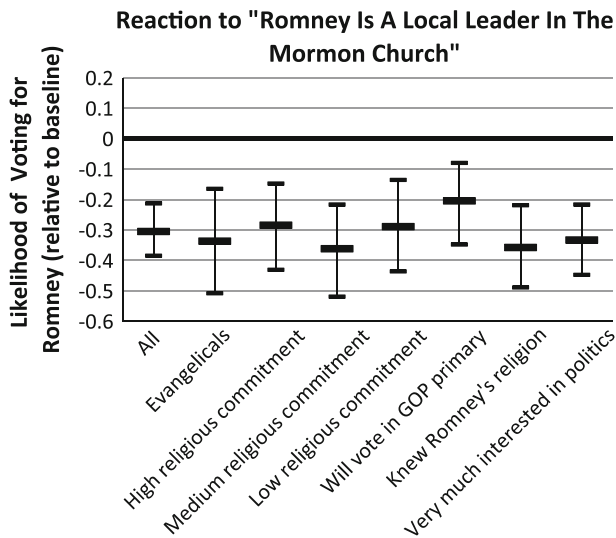
	All	Evangelicals	High religious commitment	Medium religious commitment	Low religious commitment	Will vote in GOP primary	Knew Romney's religion	High political interest
Romney local leader in "Mormon Church"	-1.42*** (.21)	-2.06*** (.52)	-1.49*** (.40)	-2.45*** (.48)	-1.21*** (.36)	-1.50*** (.43)	-1.69*** (.33)	-1.57*** (.29)
Romney local leader in "his church"	-.19 (.21)	-.28 (.58)	.32 (.42)	-.88* (.50)	-.42 (.33)	.94* (.58)	-.17 (.33)	-.30 (.30)
Age	.0003 (.006)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.006 (.01)	-.007 (.01)	-.02** (.01)	.003 (.009)
Female	-.47*** (.17)	-.57 (.44)	-.84 ** (.36)	-.96*** (.37)	-.28 (.29)	-1.03*** (.38)	-.65** (.27)	-.71*** (.24)
South	.22 (.19)	.21 (.41)	.06 (.36)	.78** (.39)	.06 (.31)	-.07 (.39)	.50* (.29)	.41* (.25)
Constant	1.40*** (.38)	2.89*** (1.10)	2.37*** (.81)	3.32*** (.87)	.53 (.60)	2.82*** (.93)	2.76*** (.63)	1.35*** (.54)
N	701	165	206	230	225	231	318	372
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.08	.15	.12	.17	.05	.18	.12	.10

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .10$



**Fig. 1** Results derived from Table 1. Each data point represents the change in the probability of being likely to vote for Romney upon being told that he is “a local leader in his church.” The 95 % confidence intervals have been calculated using CLARIFY (Monte Carlo simulation). Control variables have been set to a male of average age who does not live in the South



**Fig. 2** Results derived from Table 1. Each data point represents the change in the probability of being likely to vote for Romney upon being told that he is “a local leader in the Mormon church.” The 95% confidence intervals have been calculated using CLARIFY (Monte Carlo simulation). Control variables have been set to a male of average age who does not live in the South

include 95 % confidence intervals around the point estimates generated using Monte Carlo simulation.<sup>15</sup>

When comparing the overall effect of the *Church* versus *Mormon* frame, it is the latter that triggers the most negative response. Hearing that Romney is a local leader “in his church” does not produce a significant change in his support (the coefficient is not significant, and the confidence interval for the predicted value overlaps 0). In contrast, hearing that Romney has played an active role in the “Mormon church” does produce a statistically significant effect. Interestingly, the 0.3 drop in the probability of Romney’s support caused by the *Mormon* frame is roughly comparable to the share of the US population who openly say that they will not vote for a Mormon presidential candidate.

Using precisely the same method, we also test voters’ reactions to learning the religious background of Hillary Clinton and Mike Huckabee. Compared to a generic but positive baseline description, learning that Hillary Clinton is “an active layperson in the United Methodist Church” has no statistically significant effect on voters. However, reading that Mike Huckabee has “been an ordained Southern Baptist pastor” does cause a drop of 0.13 in the probability of his support. While statistically significant, this is a much smaller effect than the negative reaction to Romney’s Mormonism. Southern Baptists are likely to be perceived as closer to mainstream Christianity than Mormons, but perhaps not as mainstream as United Methodists.

We thus find confirmation that voters’ negativity toward Romney’s religious background is due to his Mormonism specifically and not to his simply being religious. Furthermore, negative reactions to Mormonism exceed the reactions to the religious backgrounds of a leading Democratic candidate and a Republican rival. This finding is especially notable as it reflects a reaction to Romney’s religious *affiliation*—of the sort John F. Kennedy faced—rather than to his level of religious *commitment*.

Next, we turn to examining how different subgroups of voters reacted to learning about Romney’s Mormonism. For the most part, the effects do not vary across the groups. None of the subgroups had a significant reaction to the information that Romney is a leader in his unnamed church. One group—respondents with a medium level of religious commitment—comes close to a statistically significant reaction to the *Church* frame, but the confidence interval touches zero and thus is technically insignificant. The fact that voters with knowledge of Romney’s religion did not react negatively to the *Church* frame is especially interesting. This could be because respondents followed the survey’s directions scrupulously, as they were asked whether the “above information” (i.e. no other information) made them more or less likely to vote for Romney. Or it might be because negative reaction to Romney’s Mormonism has to be cued.

In contrast, every type of voter responded negatively to the *Mormon* frame; while the point estimates are slightly different, the confidence intervals for each group overlap with those of every other group. In other words, voters of all types were equally affected by the *Mormon* frame—negative reaction was not concentrated

<sup>15</sup> Confidence intervals are calculated using CLARIFY (Tomz et al. 2003).

**Table 2** Social contact and the effect of religious cues on being less likely to vote for Romney: Results from logistic regression (0 = less likely, 1 = more likely)

	No contact (do not know a Mormon)	Moderate contact (Mormon acquaintance)	High contact (Mormon as close friend or family member)
Romney local leader in “Mormon Church”	−.83** (.35)	−2.06*** (.46)	−.79 (.69)
Romney local leader in “his church”	.23 (.38)	−.44 (.45)	.43 (.74)
Age	−.002 (.01)	−.004 (.01)	−.03 (.02)
Female	−.59* (.31)	−.62* (.36)	−.69 (.59)
South	−.04 (.32)	.24 (.37)	.15 (.65)
Constant	1.31** (.64)	1.91** (.02)	2.96 (1.46)
<i>N</i>	219	172	61
Pseudo <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.05	.13	.08

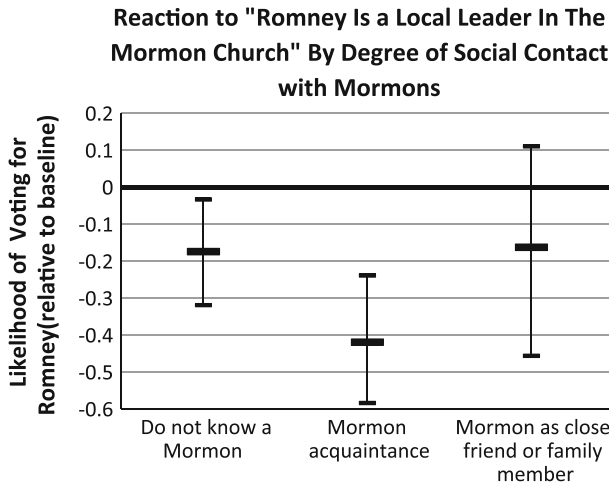
Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .10$

among evangelicals, the highly religious, Republican primary voters, voters with high political interest or those who were already aware of Romney’s religion.

What about the impact of social contact on these patterns? Our first test of the two social contact hypotheses is whether the negative reaction to the *Mormon* frame varies by degree of social contact with Mormons. Table 2 displays models with the same variables as Table 1, but with respondents divided into the three social contact categories. Figure 3 displays the predicted values derived from those three models. The results confirm the curvilinear hypothesis about the effects of social contact. While the confidence intervals overlap, the point estimates nonetheless show that the strongest negative reaction to Romney’s Mormonism is among those respondents who have a medium level of contact with Mormons. Those who do not know a Mormon have a drop of 0.17 in the probability of voting for Romney; for those who have a Mormon acquaintance, the drop is 0.42. Recall that the drop for the general population is 0.3.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Benson et al. (2011) present similar results to ours for social contact within the context of the presidential primary when political competition is highest between Mormons and evangelicals. However, precise comparisons are difficult because they measure social contact using frequency of contact by splitting the social contact into two groups, high and low. Our question better captures the depth of the social contact and allows us to identify a middle group. We do not have comparable data from a general election period to assess how changing political competition might affect our results.



**Fig. 3** Results derived from Table 2. Each data point represents the change in the probability of being likely to vote for Romney upon being told that he is “a local leader in the Mormon church.” The 95% confidence intervals have been calculated using CLARIFY (Monte Carlo simulation). Control variables have been set to a male of average age who does not live in the South

### The Impact of Campaign Information About Mormons

Next we assess the impact of campaign information about Mormons on support for Romney. Here we randomly assigned respondents to receive one of three treatments, which, as before, will be compared to a baseline condition that makes no mention of Romney’s religion. One group of respondents received all of the boilerplate biographical information about Romney along with the description that Romney a leader in the Mormon Church, but with the additional statement that “some people believe Mormons are not Christians” (*Not Christian* treatment). For most voters the belief that Mormons are not Christians frames Romney’s religion negatively, by reinforcing the suspicion that Mormons are outsiders—that is, the frame elicits a reaction based on a previously held negative stereotype of Mormons.

The other two treatments included a counterclaim to rebut the charge that Mormons are not Christians. The first of these counterclaims is what we label the *Separationist* argument, and essentially echoes the words of Kennedy in 1960 (and Romney in 2007): a presidential candidate’s religious affiliation ought to be irrelevant to voters. The treatment with the *Separationist* argument includes all the text found in the *Not Christian* frame, followed by the statement: “Others say that Mitt Romney’s religion should not be an issue in the campaign, since a person’s faith should be irrelevant to politics.” The second counterclaim, also made by Romney, stresses the commonality of different religious traditions. The *Common Values* treatment adds the following to the text of the *Not Christian* treatment: “Others point out that Mormons believe in Jesus Christ, and that they have the same values as members of other faiths.” These frames resemble Druckman’s (2001) “communication frames” and assess voters’ reactions to campaign messages about Mormons offered the 2008 primary campaign.



**Table 3** Social contact and the effect of the “non-Christian” frame on being less likely to vote for Romney: Results from logistic regression (0 = less likely, 1 = more likely)

	All	No contact (do not know a Mormon)	Moderate contact (Mormon acquaintance)	High contact (Mormon as close friend or family member)
Mormons are not Christian	−1.31*** (.25)	−1.44*** (.40)	−1.52*** (.44)	−.25 (.64)
Mormons are not Christian, faith is irrelevant	−.94*** (.25)	−.58 (.38)	−1.30*** (.43)	−.72 (.73)
Mormons are not Christian, have same values as other religions	−.83*** (.25)	−.52 (.41)	−1.31*** (.43)	−.08 (.79)
Age	.02*** (.006)	.04*** (.01)	.001 (.01)	.004 (.02)
Female	−.33* (.18)	−.35 (.30)	.28 (.28)	−.54 (.50)
South	.08 (.19)	−.30 (.32)	.35 (.31)	.30 (.58)
Constant	.22 (.40)	−.65 (.65)	1.42** (.68)	.93 (1.09)
N	609	231	228	78
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.06	.09	.06	.03

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .10$

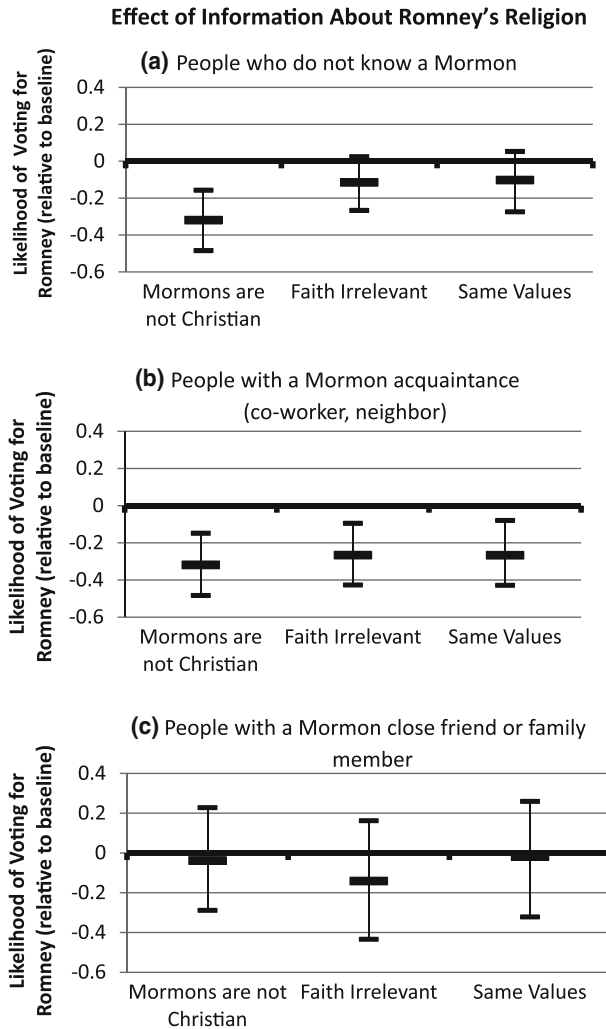
We test voters’ reactions to these statements, relative to the baseline treatment, once more using a logit model with the same control variables as above. When all voters are grouped together, the frame that Mormons are not Christian results in a drop in the probability of support for Romney of .28.<sup>17</sup> The two counter-frames partially assuage voters, but not enough to ameliorate the negative reaction to the *Not Christian* frame. The *Separationist* counter-frame results in a drop of 0.19, while the *Common Values* counter-frame drops it by 0.17.<sup>18</sup>

What about the impact of social contact with Mormons? Again, respondents are divided into three levels of social contact with Mormons. The results are presented graphically in Figs. 4a–c, while the full results are in Table 3.

The results are striking and again consistent with the curvilinear hypothesis. Among voters who do not know a Mormon (Fig. 4a), we observe a strong negative effect for the *Not Christian* treatment, but also see that both counter-frames

<sup>17</sup> With an upper bound of −0.18 and a lower bound of −0.38.

<sup>18</sup> For the *Separationist* frame, upper bound = 0.10, lower bound = −0.29. For the *Common Values* frame, upper bound = −0.07, lower bound = −0.27.



**Fig. 4** a, b, c All results derived from Table 3. Each data point represents the change in the probability of being likely to vote for Romney upon being told that he is “a local leader in the Mormon church.” The 95% confidence intervals have been calculated using CLARIFY (Monte Carlo simulation). Control variables have been set to a male of average age who does not live in the South.

neutralize the negative reaction. These are voters who are likely to have less personal information about Mormons, and thus they react strongly when they hear the charge that Mormons are not Christians. Likewise, they are swayed by the counterclaims, such that there is no statistically significant difference between the baseline (no mention of religion) and either of the counterclaims. In short, these voters were the most persuadable—in both directions.

Results for voters who have a Mormon for a close friend or family member are more tenuous, given that there are only 67 cases. Nonetheless, as hypothesized, we

find little negative reaction to the claim that Mormons are not Christian, and likewise little reaction to either counterargument (Fig. 4c).

When we examine voters with a moderate level of contact with Mormons we find considerable support for the curvilinear hypothesis (Fig. 4b). When compared to those who either know a Mormon well or not at all, people with a Mormon acquaintance react to the *Not Christian* claim with roughly the same intensity as people who have no contact with Mormons. However, like those people who have a high degree of contact, they are also not persuaded by the counterarguments. In other words, their minds appear to be made up, and are largely impervious to persuasion otherwise—at least by the specific counterclaims offered by Romney and his supporters.

In sum, using experimental data testing the claims and counterclaims made in the real time of the 2008 presidential primaries, we find that being identified as a Mormon caused Mitt Romney to lose support among some voters. Perhaps more importantly, however, we have seen that voters react in different ways to the information that circulates during a campaign, depending on their own personal experience. Voters are not blank slates. When compared to voters who have a close relationship to a Mormon, those who have moderate contact with a member of the Mormon faith leads voters to react more negatively to the incendiary charge that Mormons are not Christians. But compared to voters who have no contact with Mormons—who also react negatively to Romney’s Mormon faith—voters with moderate contact are also largely impervious to positive counterarguments about Mormonism.

### A Piece of the Puzzle

This paper offers evidence on a piece of the puzzle of Mitt Romney’s inability to break the stained glass ceiling in the 2008 presidential campaign. In an era when many politicians speak openly about their religious beliefs, especially to win over socially conservative voters, why would voters respond negatively to Mormonism—a religion known for socially conservative views? In part, the answer lies in the perception that Mormons are a religious out-group. Romney thus faced an obstacle not unlike Al Smith in 1928 or John F. Kennedy in 1960 (the first two Catholic presidential candidates). All three candidates faced opposition because of their religious affiliation. Romney’s experience reminds us that Mormons have not yet moved from being a religious out-group to an in-group. While Mormons are no longer confronted with the violence of the nineteenth century, they nonetheless face political opprobrium in some circles.

An important factor explaining the stained glass ceiling Romney faced is the social insularity of Mormons—a pattern reminiscent of Catholics of previous generations (Herberg 1955; Finke and Stark 2005). This lack of social contact appears to reduce the acceptance of Mormons in the broader population, which in turn conditioned voters’ responses to faith-based charges and counter-charges associated with the Romney campaigns. From Romney’s perspective, voters who had moderate contact with Mormons were more of a problem than voters who had

no contact with Mormons at all. At the same time, voters with close contact with Mormons—a small group to be sure—were the least influenced by charges about his faith. These results complement those of Benson et al. (2011), who found that, among evangelical voters, social contact with Mormons did not assuage their skepticism toward a Mormon presidential candidate, at least during the primaries.

Although focused on a particular candidate in a given election, our findings have implications beyond the 2008 presidential election cycle. As of this writing (April 2012), Mitt Romney has all but formally captured a closely contested race for the 2012 nomination. Once again, Romney's Mormonism has been discussed at great length as an electoral liability. Given that the general perception of Mormons has not changed since 2008 (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2011a, 2011b), and that there is no reason to think that Americans became more likely to have Mormons as close friends or family members since 2008, our results suggest that Romney's religion will remain a potential political stumbling block.

However, the application of our analysis extends beyond Mitt Romney, and even the electoral viability of Mormon politicians more generally. These findings also add to our understanding of the challenges presented by America's high level of religious diversity. Consistent with Putnam and Campbell (2010) and social contact theory, our results suggest that sustained contact across religious boundaries—inter-religious bridging—fosters religious tolerance in the political sphere. However, our analysis adds to this literature by showing that passing contact with a religious out-group can exacerbate unease with that group, at least as it applies to electoral politics. Furthermore, our analysis underscores that campaign information does not circulate in a vacuum. The impact of the framing and counter-framing of Mormonism depends on a voter's personal experience with Mormons.

Do these findings generalize to other out-groups, religious or otherwise? Is the curvilinear relationship between contact with members of an out-group and unease with a politician from that same group idiosyncratic to Mormons, or does it apply to other minorities? Without further research, we cannot say for sure. But if this finding generalizes to other groups, the short-term prospects at the national level for candidates of small and distinctive communities—i.e. Muslims, Sikhs, gays and lesbians—are not promising.

Nonetheless, we end on an optimistic note. While the short-term prospects for the political acceptance of small and socially-isolated minorities may be worrisome, the medium- to long-term prospects are far brighter. In different ways, Jews and Catholics are instructive examples as, today, both Catholics and Jews are viewed very positively, even though historically they have suffered persecution (Putnam and Campbell 2010). John F. Kennedy famously shattered the stained glass ceiling for Catholics by becoming the first Catholic president. Today, Catholics have been fully integrated into American society. Lest one think that acceptance of Catholics is simply due to their large share of the American population, Jews are equally instructive. There are roughly as many Jews in the United States as Mormons. However, unlike Mormons, Jews have among the highest levels of inter-religious bridging. While there has not been a Jewish president, when Joseph Lieberman (who is Jewish) ran for the vice-presidency, there was little to no evidence that a lack of acceptance of Jews cost him votes (Kane et al. 2004).

For both Catholics and Jews, their growing acceptance has accompanied their full integration into American society, creating opportunities for Americans of different religions, or no religion at all, to have sustained personal contact with Catholic and Jewish neighbors, friends, and family members.<sup>19</sup> Should Mormons—or Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, or any other group—follow the same pattern, we would expect them to experience that same degree of acceptance, and shatter the stained glass ceiling once and for all.

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<sup>19</sup> Note that we are not suggesting that social contact is the *sole* explanation for the current warmth toward Catholics and Jews, only that it is an important part of the story and the one over which other groups have some control. Specifically, attitudes toward Jews are undoubtedly affected by sympathy in the wake of the Holocaust.

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